

I HAD EXPECTED TO MEET A

brooding, intense character, straight from the pages of the Bronte sisters' novels, of which she is an avid reader. Instead I found Jane Campion to be more like a grown-up schoolgirl, with a disarming modesty and an uninhibited laugh which frequently punctuates her New Zealand accent.

Her reputation for wanting everyone to like her is widespread, and within minutes of talking with her at her Sydney editing suite, I am added to her list of conquests: "I used to feel, 'I hope the caterer likes me', when I started in this job ... But I think that is changing. I like friendly conditions for people to work in, but I have been a little over-obsessive with being liked," she confesses.

These days she is more concerned with getting the job done to her satisfaction and earning respect that way, than winning pals on set by being nice.

Ironically, when it comes to the content of her films, "making things nice" is not something of which she can be accused. Sweetie, her first feature, with its memorable scene of actor Genevieve Lemon, naked and farting up a tree, met with boos and hisses at Cannes last year. At the time Campion was shocked at this response, but is now philosophical. She explains that the boos emanated from members of the gutter press,

and that the 'important' critics were not so negative — indeed welcomed it. "I don't mind people not liking the film. But people who actually think it's disgusting I have no patience for. It's pathetic. I think it comes from minds that are completely closed up. They were the wrong audience for *Sweetie*, their conspiracy of decency was offended."

Her previous films, though shorter, have likewise tended to be perverse in content, saved from sheer nihilism by their playful sense of humour. There was A Girl's Own Story, with its discomforting love scene between a schoolgirl and her brother. Her first film Peel, which won her initial acclaim at Cannes with a coveted Palm D'Or, was based on an explosive episode in a family's history. Jane Campion admits she has an aversion to idealising family life which has little to do with her own comfortable and nurturing early homelife. Though now 35 years old it seems she is reconsidering the fervour of her crusade.

"Maybe I've been a little bit over zealous in looking at the darker side of things. I think I've had a good personal background which allows me a bit more freedom perhaps in looking at the darker side. I don't feel fearful about exploring it, but as I get older, I don't feel the same desire to expose family as a treacherous force in society (laughs). I

basically feel that families are fantastic and they create who you are, your sense of self, but just like everything else they have their down sides."

Though her films are usually funny, albeit in a sinister sense, Campion's next release, a television drama, will be no laughing matter. This is to be based on the life of author Janet Frame who spent eight years in a psychiatric hospital misdiagnosed as schizophrenic. The series is titled *An Angel At My Table*, which is the name of the second book in the New Zealand author's moving three-part autobiography.

It was after the first of the books, To The Is-land, was released that Campion and her current producer Bridget Ikin (a New Zealander also) decided to adapt this antipodean version of the Frances Farmer story. Yet that was in 1983, and they had to wait for volumes two and three to surface before they could proceed.

Says Campion: "My first memory of Janet Frame was when I was about thirteen. I remember reading the novel *Owls Do Cry* and feeling really stirred by its lyrical quality and yet sense of turmoil, which I found very passionate. I always associated Janet's writing with my own emerging artistic kind of mind, she was someone who led the path. Like many teenagers I felt depressed about the

BEING BRAVE

world. Janet seemed like a voice speaking to me."

Added to the intrigue, the young Campion had heard that the author had been in a mental hospital and that she was 'sick'. "I would go up the main north road past Porirua mental hospital in Wellington, I remember looking out at these plain wooden buildings and imagining Janet being in there."

"When the biographies came out it was an incredible opportunity to hear from her. The shock of it was, after reading the first [volume], to all intents and purposes, her family life seems completely normal. It could have been my childhood.

"I found it incredibly compulsive reading.

I felt so close to it, I wanted to make it available in film or television form, and the second book just confirmed my feeling. It is told so frankly and disarmingly it completely opens up your heart to that character."

Campion praises Frame for the sensitive and honest way, in both her biography and fiction, she tells the story of the years spent in hospital. "Eight years of thinking that she had a deteriorating mind has pretty final results, she came out of hospital an incredibly fragile human. At 30 she had never had a romance; never had a normal life."

The first step in making the series was to meet the author in person to ask her permission to adapt the biography. This was not easy to arrange considering Frame had a reputation of being a recluse. That the film-maker was as yet unheard of, was another disadvantage. Yet Campion's godmother was a friend of Frame's sister and so a meeting was arranged via these go-betweens.

"At this stage we didn't have anything behind us, I'd just finished film school, hadn't got any prizes... which might have given me a guarantee of some respectability. Janet just said you seem adventurous, and I like adventurous people doing my work." And that was the beginning. controlled. In the old days it was a like controlled. In the old days it was a like autobiographies don't necessar lot of detail about this. I read Fact water (her fictional account of this and asked Janet if we could include some from it." The author gave the nod.

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Campion's first impression of the author, now in her sixties, was that "the world feels very fresh and new to her, that childlike thing of seeing everything for the first time. At the same time she is an immensely distinguished thinker and immensely well read. I remember asking her what she was doing for Christmas

and she said she was going to spend it with some friends, and I asked who they were and she said 'the Bronte sisters'."

Some three years later, after a year had been spent on the script by writer, Laura Jones, and two-and-a-half million dollars had been rustled up, Campion and a crew of 40 arrived in New Zealand to begin shooting the three-part series. The screening rights, after a long hard sell, had been bought by ABC television. The cast required 140 people, the shoot spanned twelve weeks, and they had an itinerary which took the cumbersome team to Europe. At times panic set in, and Campion felt that she had embarked on something far bigger than herself.

During the New Zealand stage of the shoot Janet Frame herself visited the set, not to supervise as other authors might, but simply because curiosity had gotten the better of her. There she met with the three actors playing herself at various ages - their frizzy red hair a replica of the untameable mop of her youth. Campion says: "I was a bit scared you know, worried she might think I was grossly misrepresenting her, and the things in her life which were hurtful and painful ... Obviously I was trying to do my very best but one can fail at that. She had read the scripts and liked them. Janet seems to be very generous and open, yet one is a bit scared, I was doing an adaptation of her autobiographies after all."

When it came to the psychiatric hospital scenes more factual information was needed. "Nobody really knows how people were in the forties and fifties, because people are now drugged and their behaviour is more controlled. In the old days it was a lot crazier. The autobiographies don't necessarily have a lot of detail about this. I read Faces In The Water (her fictional account of this period) and asked Janet if we could include some stuff from it." The author gave the nod.

On the first day Janet Frame sat about a hundred metres from the set, and "needed binoculars to see what was going on!" Though eventually she crept up so that she was seated directly behind the camera. "She seemed to be enjoying it and afterwards apparently said she didn't think she would ever get back to earth again," says Campion with delight.

It was not uncommon for the author to call up to offer advice on whether her father really wore a hat and other true-life details. Her major criticism was that they had not managed to convey quite how poor the Frame family had been.

To spare her feelings the author was excluded when the crucial scenes in the psychiatric ward were shot. For authenticity's sake they filmed inside a genuine psychiatric hospital and brought in some people with Down's syndrome to stand in. The extras were workshopped, "so people didn't just come in dry and act loony". Campion tells how the actor who plays the older Janet, Kerry Fox, spent some time in a psychiatric hospital herself to research the part. She said it was the most disturbing thing she has ever done.

An Angel At My Table, unlike her formerly stylised films, promises to have less of a noticeable Campion signature style. Instead of cinematographer Sally Bongers (who worked on Peel, A Girl's Own Story and Sweetie), Campion selected a New Zealander, Stuart Dryburgh for the job. "I hadn't worked with him before, but wanted a completely different look ... I preferred to work with a New Zealander and I didn't want it [to be] a very self-attention-grabbing style.

"It feels right, feels similar to the quality I was getting from the books; I think it is very emotional and charming and frightening too. It's a very small tale but in the end tells of a whole life. You start from her as a baby and leave her at about 40 years old, and so see the shape of her life. It has an epic quality in a tiny fashion.

"I wanted to have a low profile as a director, it's not my script and it's not my book. I wanted to do it in a way that was totally sympathetic to it, rather than lay anything on her ... but (ultimately) I don't think people would be surprised to know it was my film.

"It's a big relief for me after doing Sweetie which was co-written by me, directed by me, and such an unusual project. [When it's all your own] you always ask yourself if you really have anything to say. With this I didn't have to do that. I was not in a quandary about what I was on about, I feel very strong about Janet's books, in other instances I am vulnerable to other people's opinions."

It is surprising to realise that someone with Campion's success is prepared to admit to, at times, feeling unsure of herself. "I'm not really confident, it's not my style to be that way. I feel happy in as much as I've given [An Angel At My Table] the best of me, I feel content in that way.

"It's in my nature to be self-critical; if

sexual intrigue thing, something landscapey, an epic. Something about passion.

"One of my main influences in my thinking are the Bronte sisters who made a... strong contribution to the Romantic tradition, not the Mills and Boon, but the pure Romantic tradition and I would like to make a contribution to that if I can.



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Sweetie's in a row, that would be denying my more romantic nature."

you're not you'd be complacent ... [Being selfpromoting] would make me nervous, I'd be waiting for a big downfall."

Her attitude is that while awards and accolades make a difference to how others feel about you, they do not really affect your inner sense of worth. "Personally, you have to earn it in a different way. Certainly more people listen to me than they used to . . . I have some funny moments, during discussions about what we are going to do next, when it comes to the crunch I will say: 'Well just how many awards have you got?' . . . I need a trolley with my awards stacked on it to wheel behind me for just such instances," she says, as always, laughing.

While not sure if she is ready to take on another feature film just yet, for her next project she is considering doing a period piece.

"A love story sort of thing ... no, more of a

"I have catholic tastes, I like a lot of different things, I don't want to make ten *Sweeties* in a row, that would be denying my more romantic nature." Indeed Campion has always had a romantic streak, so much so that prior to embarking on her career as a filmmaker, something she did not start until 26, she had been preoccupied with making a career out of romance.

"I was trying to make a full-time job out of romance because there wasn't anything else interesting happening. It wasn't until I was ready to take myself seriously careerwise, that I found out how fast you can develop when you put a hundred percent into your work. You have to risk people seeing who you are. You have to expose yourself to work that way. To take that risk on, I've found that I've had this immense energy. Of course I still think love is very important, but I have fitted

it more into the scheme of things. It is something you've always got to work with, the balance between love and work, and life as an individual, learning about yourself and learning about the world, also educating yourself, and growing through a relationship.

"I have a naturally childish desire for a fantasy marriage or some kind of rescue. I'd hoped to get myself on the perfect desert island, give up the oars and that would be life, it would be easy. Yet as I've gone on my understanding is that everything takes effort, the more effort you put into things the more you enjoy them. I've actually come to terms with that, that's the way it's going to be forever.

"I think the hard thing for me was I wasn't brought up with the idea of having a career, and it was hard to take on this idea...

Little boys grow up with the idea they are going to be working for the rest of their lives.

I think the challenge for me was to do things, and to prove that I could do my best in some way and hope that it would be competitive with what else was out there. It has been a big hurdle to know that I have not only a short-term career but a career that continually matures, and the pressures that puts on your life, the choices it creates for you."

To cope with the pressures of her working schedule and to develop her sense of self, Campion has undertaken many self-awareness courses and practises meditation; though not as often as she would like.

"I don't think it matters what you do so long as you find the right path. I think meditation is important for me, I've done a lot of courses, which are all important in different ways... I would like to go in a more consistent Buddhist direction. When I say consistent, I mean meditate daily, I don't tend to because work takes over."

As the interview winds up I am astounded at the extent to which she has been prepared to reveal herself, to admit she is not always certain, and how she has managed to retain a sense of girlish delight in the world. So even if the films appal or offend, shock or bore you, it would be impossible not to fall under the spell of the person who made them.

An Angel At My Table will be appearing on ABC TV later this year.